

VZCZCXYZ1023
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHGO #0685/01 2791040
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 061040Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9528
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2305
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5766
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 9370
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6955
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2739
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4695
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

UNCLAS RANGOON 000685

SIPDIS, SENSITIVE
STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: Voice of America TV programming back on the air in Burma

REF: 08RANGOON 951 (C)

Summary -----

1. (SBU) As a result of Embassy outreach to the Ministry of Information, the GOB has allowed state-owned television to broadcast VOA-TV programs. The English language instruction series "Connect with English" began daily broadcasts on Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) the morning of October 1. This is the first U.S. program to air on Burmese state-run television in 21 years, and we expect others will follow. A Burmese pay TV channel, which currently shows some American programming including CNN, is also open to adding new American shows. Meanwhile, the Information Ministry official who was instrumental in securing approvals for the VOA-TV programs is urging increased U.S. training of Burmese journalists: "If you want to change us, train us."

Advancing Public Diplomacy on TV -----

2. (SBU) Last December, PAO and APAO visited the Ministry of Information in Nay Pyi Taw during a round of mid-level courtesy calls. At that initial meeting, U Ye Htut, Deputy Director General of the Information and Public Relation Department (since promoted to Director General), expressed interest in reintroducing U.S.-produced English language instruction programs on MRTV. U Ye Htut commented that until the 1988 government crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators, MRTV used to broadcast a popular language instruction program called "Family Album USA." He also mentioned that this meeting was his first interaction with a U.S. Embassy official in 20 years.

3. (SBU) Post subsequently presented the Ministry with sample tapes of five programs currently aired on VOA-TV that could be made available to MRTV's nationwide (terrestrial) broadcasting. The Ministry selected two programs: "Connect with English" and "Crossroads Cafe." The first episode of "Connect with English" went on the air on October 1; "Crossroads Caf" is expected to be broadcast beginning on October 31.

Introducing American Culture to a Mass Audience -----

4. (SBU) "Connect with English" is meant to be used with a series

of textbooks (with the same title) for English language instruction.

Even without the accompanying texts, viewers get enough English conversation and exposure to American culture that the program serves a useful purpose. Working-level Information Ministry and MRTV officials have told us they see the U.S. programming as playing a dual purpose: improving spoken English among the general population and serving as a counter-balance to the Korean and Chinese produced programs that currently dominate the airwaves.

15. (SBU) It is still early to gauge any feedback but the fact that MRTV is willing, after 20 years, to resume broadcasts of U.S. programming provided by the Embassy is in itself something of a breakthrough. VOA's global broadcasting rights for "Connect with English" expires on October 29, at which time MRTV will replace it with "Crossroads Cafe," another English language program geared toward adult learners.

Desire for More Programming, Training

16. (SBU) In 2006 MRTV started a pay satellite channel, MRTV-4, which includes programs such as Discovery Channel, National Geographic, MTV, ESPN and CNN. MRTV-4 is available in limited areas, but is accessible to any Burmese citizen who can afford the registration and monthly costs. In an October 2 meeting with Charge, U Ye Htut expressed a desire for even more American produced programs for MRTV-4, such as the CSI series. Prior to 1988, MRTV broadcasted such popular U.S. television series as Starsky and Hutch, Charlie's Angels, and The Love Boat.

17. (SBU) Post has openly trained reporters and editors from Burma's private (though heavily censored) newspapers in basic journalism skills. When circumstances allow, we inform the Ministry of Information and Press Scrutiny Board in advance, since they often need to provide permission for the journalists to participate -- and also at times run interference for us with police Special Branch. We have also provided a trainer for several workshops arranged through the Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association; most of the participants are from private media outlets, but roughly 25 percent come from the state-owned media. In the meeting with the Charge (as in previous meetings with Embassy officials), U Ye Htut -- a former military officer -- has praised our journalism training efforts and urged the U.S. to increase such programs, including for those working for state-run media.

Comment

18. (SBU) This greater openness toward U.S. programming is driven by forward thinking officials in the Ministry of Information, particularly U Ye Htut, though it also reflects a recognition, at least among bureaucrats, of the need to improve the country's education. U Ye Htut admitted that the Information Minister considers the VOA-TV broadcasts as a test case to see whether other ministers (and presumably the senior generals) complain. If no such criticism is forthcoming, the Minister may look for other avenues to expand programming and cooperation with the United States. On journalism training, U Ye Htut is candid in acknowledging the shortcomings of Burma's controlled press and reporters' lack of professionalism, and he is eager for the U.S. to help. As he has said on many occasions, "If you want to change us, train us."

VAJDA